

## Feature Article - *The Tablet*, 24 April 2010 In search of common ground - interreligious dialogue

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**A major new teaching document launched yesterday by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales outlines how essential for Catholicism is dialogue with other faiths. While friendships with other religions have developed, the guide warns that there is no room for complacency**

Perhaps it is a sign of the times that the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has decided to publish a teaching document on interreligious dialogue. This new publication, entitled "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger", is timely in a number of ways. The most obvious indication for a document of this kind is simply the urgency of the issue itself.

It becomes clearer every day that **good relations between the religions of the world are a vital prerequisite for peace** and for the well-being of local communities worldwide. It is now increasingly appreciated that **there can be no peace in the world without peace between religions**. A century ago, I do not think that the maxim would have been self-evident at all, but today its truth becomes more compelling with every news bulletin.

This is not, of course, to acquiesce in the facile view that religion causes wars. It is, however, to acknowledge that many of the conflicts in the world today are between groups who belong to different religions and do have a religious dimension to them: moreover, extremist elements will indeed see conflicts in religious terms.

"Meeting God in Friend and Stranger" **offers a contribution to the quest for peace from a Catholic theological perspective**. That said, it is good at the outset to address a particular issue about interreligious relations and, indeed, about this document, namely the questions of whether the issues of Christian-Muslim relations constitute the principal motivation for this document and whether Christian-Muslim relations are the lens through which interreligious relations are seen.

The answer to these questions is no. As we will see, the Catholic Church takes all interreligious relations seriously and sees them all as important for building peace in our world and strengthening the common good. But it makes significant distinctions in its view of them. Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* – the documents of Vatican II that directly address interreligious relations – distinguish between the different religions in terms of the different ways in which the Church perceives and engages with them.

In this context, the Church has a particular respect for Islam as one of the three Abrahamic faiths. But that is part of a bigger cultural and theological picture and the topic of the document is interreligious relations as a whole in all their rich variety and complexity.

These considerations I hope help to explain part of the rationale and necessity of this text, namely **providing guidance and wisdom for living the Christian life in the context of the political and social realities of the world today**. Related to this, I would propose another reason why this text is timely and necessary. It reinforces and reminds us of **the importance of dialogue as one of the key developments in the catechesis and the whole renewal of the Church** that we associate with the Second Vatican Council.

It goes without saying that Vatican II brought with it something of a shift in the way the Catholic

Church perceived and related to other Christians, other religions and, indeed, the secular world. The Church moved to an attitude of much greater openness to dialogue and greater readiness to find common ground. It is timely that this perspective be rearticulated and explored in our present situation.

Having said that dialogue is a key part of the catechesis of Vatican II, it is also important to keep in mind that this **teaching on dialogue is not an innovation**. Rather, **it is the recovery and contemporary application of something that has been integral to the life of the Church** from the outset.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, people who do not belong to the Chosen People figure significantly, and are honoured and respected. Moreover, a dominant theme in St Paul's exploration of the Christian faith was the relationship between the new faith in Jesus as Lord, and the Jewish faith out of which it grew. Interaction and dialogue between Christian faith and both the Jewish and Gentile world was part of the story of how Christianity established and developed its identity.

This continued to be the case after the New Testament era and it is a notion that has been richly explored in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, where a recurring theme is the wisdom of the Greek world in which Christianity grew and developed. The Pope clearly sees the interface and cross-fertilisation between the biblical witness and the intellectual tradition of the Greek world as something that did not happen by accident but was actually in the providence of God.

It was, for example, **the dialogue between the biblical witness to Christ and the Greek concepts of person and nature that enabled the Church to provide the definitive teaching about Jesus Christ** that we find in the early councils. So Christianity developed as a religion precisely in a process of dialogue with the secular world.

That said, we must also acknowledge the explicit use of the word "dialogue" for explaining the nature of Christianity in our times. **A crucial text** for the contemporary appropriation and exploration of this term within the Church is the **encyclical Ecclesiam Suam of Pope Paul VI**. Published during the Council, when the key documents on dialogue were in gestation, it is a seminal document in that it shows how dialogue is a fundamental element in Christianity, saying in section 70:

"Here, then, Venerable Brothers, is **the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God himself**. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer, and **prayer is a dialogue**. **Revelation**, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be **looked upon as dialogue**."

What the Second Vatican Council did was to explore the significance of the idea of dialogue for the Church and world of today. In fact, the idea of dialogue permeates the whole of the conciliar teaching but it is explored in a very explicit way in three areas.

One is, of course, **ecumenism**. The decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* proposed dialogue as the means whereby divided Christianity could move from partial communion to full communion of faith and sacramental life.

Fifty years on, formidable obstacles have emerged and so the work is still very much in progress. The Church, however, remains obstinately open to dialogue and arguments for any withdrawal usually fail to take into account the importance of dialogue for the Church itself.

Then, dialogue was also the key tool for developing **interreligious relations**. These are, of course, different from ecumenical relations since the objective cannot be unity of faith leading to full communion. The objectives are different but nonetheless crucial for the Church and the world. **The Catholic Church offers a theological and cultural framework for interreligious dialogue and a substantial section of the new document is taken up with presenting that**. This framework is firmly rooted in Catholic ecclesiological principles and it is precisely from this perspective that it seeks a response from members of other religions.

Our understanding of the significance and potential of interreligious dialogue has undergone significant development since the time of Vatican II. **Pope John Paul II, in particular, left a vital legacy of both action and teaching**. He convened the three Assisi days when leaders of other Christian world communions, as well as leaders of other religions, came together to pray (but not to "pray together"). These events were important both as initiatives in interreligious relations and as a

key development in the understanding and exercise of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

Pope John Paul's teaching on interreligious dialogue also constituted **a significant advance, particularly in terms of what he said about the action of the Holy Spirit in bringing members of other religions to salvation.** His address to the Roman Curia of 1986 and the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* are two particularly significant texts in this regard.

Finally, although not the topic of this document, it is important to note the **dialogue with the secular world**, which finds its theological justification in both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. That is also part of the picture.

We know both from history and from contemporary experience that religions can coexist in peace and harmony. So this document can be read as **offering a Catholic cultural and intellectual basis for positive relations between religions as well as proposing steps towards the creation of a society based on openness, acceptance and mutual respect.**

It is the hope of those involved in interreligious dialogue on behalf of the Bishops' Conference that this text will be widely read and be a source of real nourishment as well as a reliable guide. It is envisaged that there will be study materials aimed at helping people to engage with the important issues the document raises. This document **stands firmly in the tradition of the Church** and finds the **roots of its thinking in the Scriptures**. It also speaks to the **reality of the Church and society of today.**